

Interview

On Third Generation Activity Theory: Interview With Yrjö Engeström

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Abstract

In this interview Prof. Engeström discusses his professional trajectory and interest in cultural-historical activity theory with a focus on its insights into the fields of work and human development. He comments on recent transformations within this theoretical orientation, many of them promoted by his research into a variety of workplaces and organisations. Methodological aspects, and in particular formative intervention methods such as the Change Laboratory, are also considered. Prof. Engeström's published work covers a multitude of real-life contexts and offers us a perfect example of how psychological research can be a powerful tool not only for understanding reality but actively shaping it.

Europe's Journal of Psychology, 2012, Vol. 8(4), 515–518, doi:10.5964/ejop.v8i4.555

Received: 2012-11-20. Accepted: 2012-11-20. Published: 2012-11-30.

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Vlad Glăveanu: Professor Engeström, your research in the past decades has significantly advanced our understanding of development and learning in different work settings and made significant contributions to cultural-historical activity theory. How exactly did you become interested in these topics and what would you say influenced you most in choosing this trajectory?

Yrjö Engeström: I belong to the generation of the radical student movements of the 1960s and 1970s. As a university student and activist, like many others, I was dissatisfied with the then-dominant positivist, decontextualized, statistically oriented approach to education and psychology. In our search for alternatives, we found the Soviet-Russian tradition of cultural-historical activity theory, from Vygotsky to Luria, Leont'ev, Davydov, and others. I attempted to use these theories, in collaboration with progressive teachers, in intervention studies in school settings. But I found this very difficult given the curricular constraints of the time. In the world of work and organizations, I encountered a more open attitude toward novel ideas and practices. In 1982, I embarked on my first activity-theoretical study of work and learning. This was done among janitorial cleaners working for a large cleaning company. This job was commonly considered one that requires no education and that everybody can do without much cognitive effort. Inspired by Sylvia Scribner, among others, I wanted to show that every kind of work requires complex thinking, problem solving, and learning. This study was the beginning of an approach we now call developmental work research.

Vlad Glăveanu: Activity theory is an old tradition in psychology with roots in Eastern Europe but strong echoes, especially in past decades, in cultural and historical approaches developed in many other parts of the world. What would you say are the most notable recent developments of the theory and how are they advancing our knowledge of human development, cognition and action in concrete settings?

Yrjö Engeström: From my point of view the most notable recent development in cultural-historical activity theory is the emergence of what I have called third generation activity theory. This refers to theorizing and empirical studies which expand the unit of analysis from a single activity system to multiple, minimally two, interacting activity systems. In such a framework, for example schooling is analysed as dynamics within and interplay between the activity systems of the student and the teacher, possibly also including other relevant activity systems. This expansion is accompanied with increased attention to the dynamics of the subject, with new important openings into the analysis of agency, experiencing, and emotion.

Vlad Glăveanu: While many would think of development and learning in the context of childhood years your work has focused in particular on adult learning and organisational settings. What is unique about these contexts and how can a concept such as ‘expansive learning’ help us understand and intervene in them?

Yrjö Engeström: Workplaces and organizations are cradles that generate new forces of production that eventually change the world. Societal contradictions are intensively played out in these settings. Thus, workplaces and organizations are optimal laboratories for observing and analyzing collective and individual development, learning and cognition “in the wild.” Observation and analysis in dynamically changing settings must be based on what Urie Bronfenbrenner called “transforming experiments” which radically restructure the environment, producing new configurations that activate previously unrealized behavioral potentials of the subjects. Building on Vygotsky’s principle of double stimulation and my theory of expansive learning, we have developed a methodology of formative interventions aimed at generating collective agency among practitioners faced with the challenge of redesigning their activity systems. Expansive learning is learning what is not yet there, that is, learning to master a new way of working while designing and implementing that new way of working.

Vlad Glăveanu: Great emphasis in your work has been placed on designing and re-designing activity systems and capturing the essence



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of transformation and change in organisations. What are the best methodological tools we can use to unpack these processes?

Yrjö Engeström: In my research center, the [CRADLE](#), we have developed and implemented in a variety of settings a formative intervention method called the Change Laboratory. A working collective, such as a team or group of practitioners representing different functions in an organization, goes through eight to ten sessions in which they analyse the contradictions of their activity and construct a new model to resolve them. They first encounter “mirror data” depicting recurring problems and disturbances in their work, then analyze the history of their activity to identify systemic contradictions that give rise to the troubles. This leads to a focused effort to sketch a zone of proximal development for the activity and a model that can become the core concept of the new way of working, followed by selected experiments to test the model and eventually full-scale implementation in practice. All this is accomplished with the help of “second stimuli”, conceptual and graphic tools, initially offered by the interventionist-researchers but regularly modified and often replaced with more appropriate ones by the practitioners themselves in the process of the intervention.

Vlad Glăveanu: Great emphasis in your work is also placed on practical intervention and the facilitation of positive transformation in a multitude of work settings. How can tools such as the ‘Change Laboratory’ achieve these aims and what are the opportunities but also challenges faced by practitioners in this regard?

Yrjö Engeström: No tool achieves anything by itself. The Change Laboratory must be carefully adapted to the local circumstances and historical conditions, every time it is used. Currently there are Change Laboratory interventions underway at least in Mexico, Brazil, South Africa, Serbia, and Russia. Experiences from and analyses of these interventions will greatly add to our understanding of the potentials and limits of this method. We already know some critical issues: timing (the intervention should be in synch with a major transformation effort that will take place in any case), alignment (the intervention should not take place in a bubble, separated from key stakeholders and partners outside the focal activity system), and vertical dialogue (an intervention with frontline workers and clients should be in active dialogue with managers and policy makers).

Vlad Glăveanu: Your newest book, ‘Collaborative Expertise: Expansive Learning in Medical Work’ will focus on the medical sector. What is specific about this work context and how is ‘collaborative expertise’ built and enacted in medical work?

Yrjö Engeström: I have studied and conducted interventions in health care settings since 1986, which means more than 25 years. This context is of huge societal importance, especially with regard to the aging of populations and the dramatic increase in chronic illnesses. Health care is full of devoted, highly educated and hard-working practitioners and patients. Yet, the internal divisions of labor and the primary contradiction between profit-making and healing have led to severe fragmentation of care. The challenge of developing new forms of collaborative and expansive expertise is obvious. This is also a challenge to our deep-seated notions of expertise as an individual, well-defined property. In our intervention studies we have generated and tested the idea of fluid “negotiated knotworking” as a new type of expertise in which no single party is the permanent center of power: the center does not hold.

Vlad Glăveanu: Activity theory has been used to theorise and improve work processes in a variety of organisations. What would be the next type of settings you would like to see the theory applied to in the future? What new avenues

of research would, on the one hand, benefit from applying this conceptual framework and, on the other, potentially contribute to its further development?

Yrjö Engeström: I have recently started a new project in which we study collective concept formation in quite diverse settings – home care of the elderly in Helsinki, tomato growers in western Finland, and builders of traditional wooden ships in India, Russia, and Finland. The choice of these settings illustrates two emerging concerns. First, I am interested in new kinds of global connections and interactions between ostensibly very different activity settings and cultures. Secondly, I am interested in understanding the future-making power and potential of traditions, and the creation of sustainable futures by mixing or blending insights and practices from different historical layers, cultural contexts, and modes of knowing. This may be a move toward a new, non-linear historical materialism.

Vlad Glăveanu: As the Director of the ‘Center for Research on Activity, Development and Learning (CRADLE)’ at the University of Helsinki you are overseeing a number of projects and research groups applying the theory to different contexts. What are the current directions of research at the centre and what kind of projects are members involved in?

Yrjö Engeström: Besides my own project on ‘Concept Formation and Volition in Collaborative Work Activities’ mentioned above, two exciting projects must be mentioned. Reijo Miettinen leads a large longitudinal project on ‘Building Information Modeling (BIM) as a Tool for Collaboration and Learning in Multi-Actor Construction Projects’. This is research into the practical implications and theoretical potentials of a new complex technology that may radically change the nature of collaboration in construction industry. The other new project, led by Annalisa Sannino, is called ‘The Emergence of Agency: Foundations for Educational Change from Below’. This project is aimed at developing a theory of the emergence of transformative agency, grounded in both experiments and formative field interventions.

Vlad Glăveanu: Finally, what would be your advice for young, emerging scholars interested in development, learning, organisations and activity theory? How can they succeed in today’s academic and professional world and make an impact through their research?

Yrjö Engeström: My advice is: Take no shortcuts, this is not a superficial fad you can pick and use as theoretical decoration in your studies. This approach is demanding both theoretically and practically. But it can make a difference, it can influence and change people’s lives. To succeed within this approach, you need collaboration, so find colleagues and centers that you can interact with and learn from. For example, CRADLE organizes every August a three-week international summer school course on Activity Theory and Formative Interventions. It is one good way to start.

Vlad Glăveanu: Thank you very much for sharing your thoughts with us.